

## Essay for the Black History Month Competition

[Topic: "Choose a noteworthy African-American figure, past or present, who embodies the ideals espoused by American civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Describe the person's life and importance and why you think he/she exemplifies Dr. King's ideals.]

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“Behind every great man is a great woman,” (A quote by unknown origin). I believe that Coretta Scott King is an individual, who best exemplifies the ideals and concepts of her husband, Martin Luther King. Martin Luther King was an activist, one of the best orators, a prominent leader in the African – American Civil Rights Movement, a follower of the concept of Non-Violent Resistance and someone who was persistent in the attainment of justice. Coretta Scott King was all of the above and more, even though Martin Luther King Jr.’s work was more profound. She was also a singer, violinist, teacher, advocate for the retention of stigmas against minorities, and an innovative woman. This is a woman who stuck with her husband though it all, which alone is to be commended, especially when compared to the rising amount of divorces that occur in modern times. Her life story holds pages that should be lauded.

The life of Coretta Scott King began in Heiberger, Alabama on the 27<sup>th</sup> April 1927. As she grew up on a farm, Coretta King faced racial segregation at an early age. She remembers having to walk five (5) miles to a one-room black school while the ‘whites’ took buses to schools nearer to their homes. Due to this segregation, she was left with the only option of attending a black high school, Lincoln Normal High School, and was privileged enough to take the bus there, only because her mother owned and operated the bus at that time. Mrs. King initiated her fight against the racial segregation while in college (Antioch College), in joining the Antioch Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Antioch’s Race Relations and Civil Liberties Committees. She graduated from Antioch with a B.A. in music and education, when she acquired a scholarship to the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, thus ending her childhood.

It was while studying in Boston she met Martin Luther King Jr. which changed her life completely. In 1953 they were married by her groom’s father. The marriage meant that she

would have to give up everything – even her dreams to become a concert singer and activist – to take up the responsibilities of a pastor's wife, when the family moved the year the marriage to Montgomery. There Martin Luther King became the pastor at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Another change quickly followed as Coretta King had to raise children; Yolanda Denise (1955), Martin Luther, III (1957), Dexter Scott (1961), and Bernice Albertine (1963).

The change that Mrs. King made did not affect her singing or activism or a combination of the two. In the early days she balanced her life of a mother to that of a singing activist. For instance, while Mrs. King raised her children, she still orated in front of church, civic, college, fraternal, and peace groups. Most notably, she staged many fundraising concerts that encompassed a remarkable coagulation of prose, poetry, singing, activism, pro-activity and the fight African – American civil rights, for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (a direct organization in which Dr. King was the first president).

Above it all Mrs. King stood behind her husband, through it all. In 1957, when Ghana had independence celebrations, Dr. and Mrs. King went to Africa. She accompanied her husband to India on a pilgrimage to honor the memory of Mahatma Gandhi (the visionary who motivated them in the ways of his philosophy of Non-violence) in 1959. When Dr. King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway, she was there. Even before Dr. King promulgated his opposition to the US intervention, Mrs. King associated with international peace and justice organizations. Mrs. King was marching at the side of her husband in the March of the African Americans' Boycott against the Segregation Laws. She proved, time and time again, that she was loyal to her husband, and that she shared the deepest connection of passion for racial equality with him.

When her husband of fifteen years died in 1968, this did not deter her from ensuring that her husband was remembered and from continuing his work. She was indeed the great woman who stood behind a great man (Martin Luther King Jr.) but when that man died, she held fast to her composure and ensured that he and other great African Americans were remembered while continuing to grow in the ways that made her life.

For one thing, Mrs. King devoted much of her life to ensure that the King Centre (Martin Luther King Jr., Centre for Nonviolent Social Change) is what it is today. It must be noted that this was the first monument that was erected in remembrance of an African American. The Centre is now part of a twenty-three acre National Historic Park that host's the individual's birth home and other parts of his life. At the Centre, the philosophy and methods of Dr. King Jr. were passed on to another generation and moved onto national and international frontiers. Mrs. Scott King ensured that the center created and housed one of the largest archives of documents pertaining to Civil Rights Movements. After Mrs. King worked twenty-seven years at the rudder of the King Centre, Dexter Scott King inherited that position at the Centre, in 1995.

Another part of Mrs. King's life was the fight for the national holiday that is in January, in honor of her husband. She was at the forefront of the lobbying that was needed to make Martin Luther King Jr. Day a reality. When Congress established the Martin Luther King Jr. Federal Holiday Commission by an act of 1983, no one else but Mrs. Coretta Scott King chaired the commission. In January 1986, she oversaw the first Martin Luther King Jr. Day that came to fruition. The holiday is now celebrated in over one hundred countries by millions of people of varying ethnicity.

The largest demonstration ever held was spearheaded by none other than Mrs. Coretta King. This was done on the twentieth anniversary of the Historic March on Washington, where Mrs. King rallied over eight-hundred Human-Rights Organizations under the Coalition of Conscience (the coalition also sponsored the event).

Mrs. King and three of her children were arrested on the South-African Embassy in Washington in 1985. They were arrested because they protested against the System of Apartheid in South Africa – a system which spawned racial segregation and disenfranchisement. Ironically, Mrs. King was one who stood with Nelson Mandela when he was sworn in as president of South Africa in Johannesburg in 1995.

In 1987, she helped to organize a National Mobilization against Fear and Intimidation in Forsyth County, Georgia and a year later she re-convened the Coalition of Consciousness for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Historic March on Washington.

Coretta Scott King served as the head of a delegation of Women of the U.S. for a Meaningful Summit in Athens, Greece, 1988. And following the commencement of political restructuring in the USSR, Mrs. King co-convened the Soviet-American Women's Summit in Washington D.C. Mrs. King was an advocate for general human development from 1995 to her death in 2006.

The fact that Mrs. King was called to witness the historic handshake at the signing of the Middle Eastern Peace Awards, between Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Chairman Yassir Arafat, also, since she knew spiritual people like Mahatma Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, Dorothy Day and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, plus she dialogued constantly with heads of many states, moreover, she was a regular commentator on the Cable News Network (CNN), indicates that

Mrs. Coretta Scott King was a major activist, civil rights fighter, orator, advisor, and visionary. And just by her life, it is clear that she held the ideals, philosophies, concepts and methods of her late husband, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and even shared this to the world via the King Centre. May she rest in peace, especially after her contributions to the world.

## **References:**

The following are some website references that were used in the production of the essay:

- <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/kin1bio-1>
- <http://www.biography.com/articles/Coretta-Scott-King-9542067>
- <http://www.thekingcenter.org/MrsCSKing/>
- <http://www.thekingcenter.org/DrMLKingJr/>

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